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ABSTRACT

Although aging is a process that affects everyone, individuals can choose how they will behave as they become older. Some persons choose to focus on the negative, becoming more and more self-centered and driving away those around them, becoming a burden to themselves and to society. Others, often prompted by a midlife crisis or period of introspection, choose to age more generously, focusing on the wider world and life outside themselves and their families. This perspective, called by some philosophers "generativity," is a journey of caring that paves the way to a rewarding second half of life. Generativity helps those who embrace it to avoid the pitfalls of the other road that leads to self-absorption and stagnation. A large national survey and other studies resulted in a list of qualities of generative people: a generous view of others, a giving attitude, a positive relationship with nature, undergoing a process of personal integration, experience of a pivotal event that led to transition or rebirth, simplified lives, and hopefulness. Qualities of those who are self-absorbed and are aging unsuccessfully include the following: a tendency to blame others for problems, a tendency to alienate others, moodiness, rigid opinions, fears associated with money, obsession with life's inequities, and lack of intimate friends. Midlife people need to make a conscious effort to choose the positive behaviors that will lead to a generative old age. (KC)

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SUCCESSFUL AND UNSUCCESSFUL AGING: WHAT MAKES THE DIFFERENCE?

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This article is exerpted from Paula Hardin's forthcoming book: The Fork In The Road: Choices In Midlife which is based on her dissertation study and a large sample national survey (n=567) conducted by Market Facts, Inc.

What Shall I Do About Mother?

The phone rang. My friend Nancy had just returned from an out-of-town visit with her eighty-year-old mother.

"Paula, I thought of you and your work so often while visiting Mother. I found myself just collapsing, regressing into a childish role around her. I'd ask her how she slept, she'd say 'awful.' I'd ask her how she felt and she'd say 'terrible.' I'd encourage her to come and visit us more often and she'd say 'I can't do that, who'll drive me to the airport?' as though it was impossible to take a taxi."

"Paula, she'll never move. She'll stay in that big house, feel sorry for herself, and try to make us feel guilty. She's absolutely miserable-- and it's just getting worse. Toward the end of the trip I was clenching my jaws all the time when I talked to her."

Nancy is a woman with a reputation for taking things in stride, yet

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what she was confronting overwhelmed her. She was witnessing the painful process of her mother becoming a burden to herself, to her family, and to society. She was afraid for her mother's future— and its impact on her own life. Nancy's mother, Anna, is an example of unsuccessful aging.

Aging Is Scary

When I turned fifty I realized just how afraid I was. It was a marker event for me. The term "half a century" was impossible to ignore. I felt my life moving steadily on and I was powerless to stop the process called aging. Questions plagued me in a way I had never experienced before and I felt restless, afraid. In the night something kept asking: "What's ahead for you?" "How can you live so your future is fun, rewarding, and useful?" "What do you really want to do, have, give, and be in the years ahead?" "Is it possible to prepare for an old age that is beneficial to youself, your family, and the larger society?" "How can you have not only a good life, but a good death as well?" "Are there ways to prepare for the mystery that follows this life?"

As a nation we adulate youth. It dominates our ideas of the "good life." This tells us there must be something "bad" about getting older, as though it is unnatural. We treat aging as "the enemy" to be subdued. And so denial of the aging process becomes an expensive way of life. Using large portions of our energy to beat the time clock will eventually sabatoge us, draining the very resources we need to explore what it means to age with elegance and audacity.

Half a century ago, Carl Jung, innovative thinker and psychiatrist, decried the absence of preparation for those who are entering the second half

of life. Jung found that most people enter life after forty with the false assumption that the values, truths, and ideals which served them adequately so far will continue to do so. Because of this false assumption, people make choices in the second half of life that bring unhappiness and unnecessary suffering upon themselves. Jung chose harsh words to descrive people caught in his negative process, words such as: hypochondiracs, nigards, doctrinaires, applauders of the past, and eternal adolescents.

A Powerful Ally

There are predictable hazards in life, especially after age forty. Those who fail to negotiate these hazards successfully have not made contact with their inner core. Inner core is only one way of describing an essential, animating aspect of ourselves. Some call it the deeper self, the higher self, the center, the God within. Whatever the name, it feels like "home" when we connect with it. Jung uses the simple word Self, with a capitol "S" to indicate that this vital place in us is a self connected to that which is mysterious, transcendent-- greater than our individual, conscious identity.

Those who have connected with their inner core, their Self, can face life's inevitable hazards with strength and humor. Their sense of meaning has been tapped and their belief in themselves and in their value has grown over time until it is unshakable. Their hearts have expanded to include others and they know how to be connected to something greater than themselves. Their joy rests on that which is inextinguishable, and their lives have a compelling personal grace, magnatism, and naturalness.

What went wrong in Anna's life, or in the lives of those in our own

family systems, that finds them, in their senion years, plaguing both themselves and those around them? In Anna's case, this basically well-intentioned, religiously inclined woman at some point slipped onto a negative track-- and stayed there. Some of the inevitable disappointments and losses in life came to her and she fell under the load. Gradually she felt more and more sorry for herself, and in her pain she began to blame those around her for not rescuing her. The more she blamed, the more she drove them away. It became a deadly cycle for the whole family.

Anna's failure to connect with her vital inner core, her life-giving center, at an earlier point in her life, left her feeling impoverished. She kept looking for other people to affirm her and to give her a sense of her worth. When this strategy increasingly backfired (and it always will), she nursed her wounds until they festered and became all-consuming.

Aging well does not mean the absence of problems. It means we can choose before we get there to prepare for some of the problems that will inevitably confront us. We can learn to avoid unnecessary suffering. We can focus on attitudes and activities whose by-product is joy as we proceed along the path of life.

In Midlife We Need to Give Birth

Adulthood is a time of continuing development and growth. In midlife we come to a fork in the road of our lives. The values and goals which have served us well in the first half of our lives become increasingly irrlelvant as family, career, and health considerations shift and change. Midlife is the time to give birth to a new way of being in the world. The importance of

recognizing a choice point in midlife was well noted by Erik Erikson, a pioneer in the field of adult development. Erikson saw the choice as between "generativity" or self-absorption and stagnation.

Generativity is a process, a journey, observed Erikson. Travelers on this road develop the strength or virtue, caring, which paves the way to a rewarding second half of life. This valuable quality, caring, focuses on concern for others beyond the immediate family. It demonstrates practical concern for the younger generations and the quality of both social and environmental conditions that we are passing on to them. Caring can also be expressed through the development of thoughtful products, careful systems, quality literature, insightful art, concern for the planet's well-being, and more.

The choice to practice healthy caring in the second half of life expands our essential nature and bestows gifts on the one who cares. We begin with a new way to care for ourselves, learning to accept ourselves with honesty, patience, and warmth. We engage in the difficult work of sorting what is real from what is untrue in our lives. We gradually let go of that which has become useless and we become more conscious of impulses, longings, and wishes which now want recognition. We dare to recognize and struggle with the darker aspects of ourselves, our generational line, and our culture. This is not a journey for the timid. It is, however, essential prepartion work to uncover the debris that inhibits our connection with the Self, our vital inner core.

We learn to recognize and have compassion for the beautiful child we once were. We reclaim the gifts of the healthy child such as delight, spontaneity, creativity, playfulness. We enlarge the boundaries of our heart

including others in our deepest Self, and we enhance ourselves in the process. Generativity is always mutually beneficial.

Generativity helps us to avoid the pitfalls of the other road which leads to self-absorption and stagnation. The negative fork in the road seduces us into an ever increasing focus on our one and only life. Persons on this road feel more and more irrelevant as their world and sense of self shrinks. Eventually chronic anger, despair, meaninglessness, and helplessness dominate daily life and our relations with others.

The good news is we are given many opportunities to choose the road called generativity. This road beckons us to be newly open in our maturity to people, places, ideas, nature, growth, beauty, dreams, the spiritual way, hopes, giving, and rewards. Generativity does not necessarily look peaceful or calm, because all change and growth can be disruptive. Yet when we are living according to this path in a way that is congruent with our inner core we have chosen the route that will make all the difference in our own lives as well as in those around us.

What Positive Aging Looks Like

The following list of desirable and joy-enhancing characteristics of persons who are aging successfully is gathered from my large national survey of 567 people ages 40-75, as well as from other studies. These tracks generally describe those who have chosen the path of generativity. Such people usually:

* Have evolved a generous view of others and of the world. This includes maintaining a forgiving stance toward

human faults and inadequacies in themselves and others.

* Have a giving attitude toward themselves and others. They give more financially than most people.
* Form a caring and positive relationship to nature.
* Are still in the process of personal integration and self-understanding. They like and respect themselves.
* Have undergone a pivotal event such as divorce, job loss, health problem, move, death of a loved one, etc., that led to transition or re-birth experiences. They used that event as an opportunity to grow and expand rather than as an excuse to withdraw and blame.
* Have simplified their lives and have taken time to reflect and to gain the insights needed to clear away clutter and confusion. They learn to set limits.
* Have the courage to change both themselves and conditions around them.
* Describe themselves as spiritual. They trust God or some Higher Power and/or they trust the life process itself.
* Are sought out by others for counsel, wisdom, perspective, and creative insight.
* Are commited to continued learning and spend considerable time learning on their own or go to a variety of workshops and classes.
* Know the importance of seeking help and counsel in times of stress.
* Are clearly engaged in caring behaviors towards them-

selves and others.

* Are playful, both laughter and tears come spontaneously.
* Are people of hope. They take their dreams seriously, and their lives demonstrate that some dreams do come true.

What Negative Aging Looks Like

Those caught in self-absorption and stagnation will increasingly manifest such qualities as:

* A tendency to blame others for problems and feelings of isolation.
* A tendency to alienate others because they are difficult to be with for more than a brief time.
* Moodiness, irritability, thoughtlessness, even meanness.
* Rigidly holding on to opinions, unable to set them aside enough to listen to another's views.
* An inability to enjoy and adapt to the changing world.
* Fears associated with money; a need to clutch, control, and hang on.
* An increasing obsession with life's inequities and their own wounds.
* Noticable lack of intimate friends of any generation.
* A high use of alcohol and/or tranquilizers, TV, frenetic activity, etc.
* Inability to be a "wise elder" who has something of lasting

value to offer younger generations.

* A tendency to create guilty feelings among those around them.
* An excessive focus on themselves, what they will eat, wear, do.
* Fear of the future.

A word of caution, we all carry within us a mixture of the qualities, traits, and tendencies that appear on both lists and we may manifest any of them at any time. But if our goal is to age in a more rewarding, successful way, we need to make a conscious decision now to choose increasingly those behaviors that portend positive, long-term benefits leading to high life-satisfactions for one's self and others.

Considering Long Term Benefits

Creative aging requires that we think ahead, consider the long term effects of our daily decidings and choosings. We need to look with honesty at our lives and patterns. We need to ask:

"What will probably happen if I continue in this way?"

"Am I ready to accept the long term consequences of what I am choosing, consequences to both myself and others?"

"Is this what I really want for myself?"

As we develop the ability to listen to our lives and our deeper truth, we will begin to recognize what will enhance our later lives and what will hurt us, our loved ones, and our communities.

Each decision requires that we choose which parts of us we are going to cultivate and which parts we want to release. This is responsible choosing.

Responsible choosing is the road to authentic strength and power. It requires courage, honesty, and tenacity, and it often requires outside help in the form of education from wise older friends, self-help groups, counselling and/or therapy. But when we choose for life, we open ourself to powerful life allies: health, wholeness, and a sense that life is worth living at any age.

Successful aging emerges from an attitude, a way of being, that is vital, concerned, reflective, caring, empowered, playful. Some people retain the vigor and zest associated with midlife through their seventies, eighties-- right to the end of their days.

Life: A Generous Giver

Kahil Gibran observes, "The river continues its way to the sea, broken the wheel of the mill or not." Time moves us, like a river, inexorably along to our destination, whether we are productively engaged with life's flow or not. We can learn to find the life-flow-- the Tao-- and when we do, life gains an effortless beauty of which the wise ones speak.

We can learn to form a partnership with time, harnessing the energy of the river of life. We can engage the mill wheel with creativity and skill so it grinds the flour to make the bread that nourishes us— and those around us. And when we do, we will find we are supported, guided, and blessed beyond what we could imagine-- we will find Life a generous giver.